



What is so special about Christmas?

The holiday season is a time when the entire world reflects on the past year, what has happened internationally, and usually for them personally, and considers what they would hope to come to pass in the year to come. Businesses close, families gather together, even wars cease for the day that is Christmas, and whether Christian or not, it has meaning for the majority of the world.

Beyond the shopping and marketing, and all the commercial aspects of the holiday, the spirit of Christmas and the holiday season still infuses the people of Aruba, making it a time when the prosperous reach out to the less fortunate. It isn't only this time of year, but more so, and not only in Aruba, but on a small island, the many efforts that are made by organizations such as "Meals on Wheels" or businesses such as Valero or RBTT Bank to assist those in need are more noticeable.

On a more personal basis, THE NEWS spoke to varied individuals that are particularly and personally affected by the season and asked, "What about Christmas and the season makes it so special to you?" Their answers eloquently summed up what we believe is the essence of the holiday, and ideally the thoughts that we should reflect upon, aside from wondering "What did so-and-so get me for Christmas?"

We spoke to two religious leaders, Reverend Dick Pranger, Pastor to the Royal Dutch Marine Camp in Saveneta and Rabbi Marcelo Bater of the Temple Beth Israel. Though one is Protestant and the other Jewish, their thoughts echo each other in what they feel makes this time of year important.

Reverend Pranger, living in Aruba now for five months, was formally posted in Iraq, so has been with young men while they were in battle. His feelings reflect that experience; "As a pastor I enjoy the services and preparation for the holiday; and at the church seeing all kinds of people being together and enjoying the atmosphere of peace. They all feel the sense of brotherhood and the desire for peace, in a world that is very *dark*. Just this one moment a year when people come together thinking about peace; people of different religions, not just Christians, and that I like the most."

Rabbi Bater echoed these thoughts in a recent sermon for the beginning of Hanukkah, the "Festival of Lights" which also occurs during the season. He quoted one of the psalms with the phrase "How good and how pleasant it is that brothers dwell together." He reminded his congregation, "December is the Month of the Lights, and we share with our brothers the light that can illuminate us and guide us to the correct path. Christmas trees, Hannukkah candles; both are part of being brothers in spite of having different religions, but with respect for each other." Just as his brother and fellow religious leader Reverend Pranger, Rabbi Bater hopes that the season brings some light to a "dark world."

Atun Lee Junior and Karina Daryanani, our other interviewees reflect more personal thoughts on Christmas, but eloquent and worthwhile for all to consider. Atun, better known as "AJ" (Atun, Jr.) is the son of Aruba's former Director of Protocol, and helps him run the Sylvia Residence restaurant, as well as being editor and publisher of Entre Nos magazine. For only twenty-four years old, his thoughts are remarkably mature as he explains why he spends an entire week single-handedly decorating the central courtyard of the Sylvia Residence for the holidays. A task he has relished for the past eight years.

Anyone that plans to take an evening tour with the Kukoo Kunuku bus, will find a remarkable sight awaits them when they stop for dinner at the Sylvia Residence. "Why all this effort?" we asked AJ, and he replied "This is what I love most about the season. I do not like to decorate outside the house, having people come by to look at our house is not why I do it, or something I want. The inside is what is important, because it is for the family, for the warmth of when we do things together. When we light it up the house is special, it is cozy, and that is what I like. It is personal and for the family."

"Our family has our own Christmas traditions. We do not exchange presents, *this* is Christmas for us, decorating the house and enjoying it together as a family. Christmas is not commercial in our house. It is mostly about the old message; we go to church, and that is the most important thing, we love going to church on Christmas day, and watching our father sing in the choir. After that, we will spend time visiting all the family, which is a treat in itself. For me, Christmas is all about family, and being with our aunts and uncles that we don't have time to spend with during our busy year."

Karina Darianani is known throughout Aruba as the woman that creates the breathtaking beauty of "Christmas World" for the past fifteen years at Palais Hindu. Though raised in Singapore and Hindu, she confesses that having grown up next to a church, she loves the holiday and everything about it, the

decorations, the exchange of presents and having a tree in her home. The annual creation of the “Christmas World” is months of preparation, but what she feels is most important about Christmas is not the merchandising.

“I think Christmas is a holiday that all cultures should celebrate together, that makes us a much richer culture. The creation of “Christmas World” is a labor of love, and it is the single day of the year that the entire Palais Hindu goes on display for all of Aruba; I feel as if I am an artist showing off my latest collection.

“Christmas day itself is very emotional for us. It has a lot of meaning; we feel the spiritual aspect of it. It is day of sharing and caring, spent with family; a day of doing the little things that people do not normally have time for the rest of the year. It is a pity that it takes a big celebrative day to stop people and get them to think about one another, about these special moments. I wish there were more holidays like this, when people would “stop in their tracks.” It has become a very busy world; a very stressful world; a very fast-paced world, so when you see holidays stopping people, it’s a good thing.”

Though many may feel stressed about the last-minute shopping, or the pressing need to remember this person or that on their Christmas list, despite the complaint that many have about the commercialism of the holiday, the core spirit of it still lives. Though of very diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, this small sample of Aruba’s multi-cultural population shows that it does not have to be about the superficial aspects that critics deride, but the holiday still has deep meaning for most of us. It is still a time to contemplate and be thankful for our blessings and enjoy the simple things. It is a time to teach our children that the greatest gift is not found wrapped with pretty ribbon, but the gift of love and peace we can give to our families and the world, and if that effort was made everyday, not only at Christmas, what a better world it would be. Happy Holidays!